

Herb Witch



Elizabeth McCoy

Herb-Witch
(Book I of the Lord Alchemist Duology)
by Elizabeth McCoy

For all my English teachers, who would hopefully not be horrified.

Amazon Edition

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Chapter I

Sitting alone in the dark made it easy to tell when someone was coming, bringing light. Footsteps carried well, too, so far from the usual prisoners who waited for judging in the underground prison. Kessa'd had plenty of time to wipe her face, smooth her plain skirt, and sit up straight on the rough wooden bench.

She'd never been pretty enough to play the helpless child – not with a half-barbarian's black hair and coppery skin, and especially not with her eyes the way they were. Proper, stiff innocence, or dignified guilt, would have to serve.

She closed her eyes so she'd not be light-dazzled. There were soft words beyond the door, before it creaked open.

She held her pose, her poise. It seemed a long time, long enough to slit her eyes open and see shadows upon the glittering-black stone floor, before a man walked forwards. A black outer robe went to his knees, and his gray hose and low boots suited high merchants or lesser nobility.

Gray was favored by alchemists. Could that wretched moneylender Darul be important enough that they'd bring an alchemist to question her? Or was this a rescue to the guild's internal judgment?

"May I ask your name?" the man said, calm and perhaps the slightest bit breathy. A light voice for a man, but a grown one. She glanced up as high as she dared. The tabard was an alchemist's charcoal with embroidered patterns. He held something in his properly pale hands.

Of course, anyone could dress in anything, to bait a prisoner to confess. "You may," she said finally, stalling.

With exact politeness, he said, "I'm Iathor Kymus. I would hope you recognize me."

It took a long moment for that to sink in, the name glowing in her mind like some burning alchemist's stone. Her Guild Master himself, the Lord Alchemist. That was either very good, or very bad. She gripped her knees, for clutching the bench would be undignified and give her splinters besides. "Yes," she said. "I'm Kessa. Kessa Herbsman."

As conversationally as he'd introduced himself, he said, "I'm told you're accused of poisoning a man."

"That's what the guardsmen said when they arrested me, yes." She didn't have to pause. She'd been sitting quite long enough to brew the words. "Tradesman Darul Reus, the moneylender near North Reus Square. I'd taken tea with him, yesterday. They said he was found a drooling idiot on the floor."

The Guild Master's clothes rustled as he bent. She blinked at the clay cup he held out. "What is it?"

"Tea."

One word, without menace or lightness. Not a dark, heavy *tea that may be poisoned*. Not a blithe *tea, you silly girl*. Threat, implication, and hope chased each other in her mind, the way brews might mix in just-stirred water.

Or tea.

She opened her fingers and took the cup, staring into it. Too shadowed to see any discoloration within.

The Guild Master backed away; he spoke to someone, but all she heard was "guild business."

She paid a journeyman's dues honestly enough on each sale. (And if sometimes she recorded something other than what'd been bought . . . the proper coins still got to the proper places.) Her

training might've been unorthodox, but was sound enough to back a teacher's signature despite the smeared parchment.

Which meant Kessa had two choices. Break with the guild, and have no one of importance care what happened to her – and the *Guild Master* annoyed with her, like as not. (And that boiled over to questions about her license, her apprenticeship, her teachers, childhood, family . . .)

Or drink, and trust he was . . . fair.

He was said to be fair in guild matters.

The tea smelled wrong. Too sweet, like honey and roses. Something was in it. Of course.

She touched her tongue-tip to the surface. Yes, the sweet-bitter she couldn't describe to anyone else, not even other herb-witches.

She risked glancing over at the Guild Master. He stood, slight-framed, with his hands clasped in front of him. Hair cut above his shoulders, and bare-faced, despite nobles favoring beards and horse-tail queues this year. No jewelry. He watched her intently, without showing emotion.

At least he wasn't a smirking villain. Not that most villains were, but it gave some small hope.

She gulped the too-sweet, too-bitter tea all in one go, before she could think about what it might do. (A mint essence. Roses. Some metal-salts, sliding at the edge of her tongue.) Then she lowered the cup to her lap, head tipped back against the stone wall. Her hair fell away from her face, so she kept her eyes closed.

Clothing rustled. The bench creaked. She scented hints of alchemy and its ingredients. The Guild Master said, quietly, "It's not a loyalty potion."

Kessa blinked her eyes open briefly before remembering to keep them closed, and didn't move to betray her relief.

The sound of his clothing warned her, so she didn't startle when he put his hand on her forehead. His palm was warm. She remembered to breathe, as he pressed his fingers against her wrist for a few heartbeats.

Even more softly, he said, "You've an alchemist's immunity."

Well. And is that what it's called? How strange, that it had a name. How strange, that others might have it. Her world spun, her secret somehow smaller and greater at the same time.

As if he spoke of the weather, he added, "That's a proposal."

The words didn't make sense. Perhaps the dosed tea *had* dropped her into an alchemical daze. Perhaps darker rumors (suggested of every guild's master) were true, and he did hire poisoners when daytime politics failed.

"A . . . proposal." Her tongue and lips seemed to work, at least. If this was an herb-dream, it was most realistic.

"You're not already married, are you?" He moved her hair to see her unpierced left earlobe, where herb-witches and alchemists wore wedding rings to keep them away from brews.

Not a business proposal? "You're not *serious!*" She squinched her eyes tight-closed lest she stare. That rarely *helped* a discussion.

"I'm usually serious."

"But . . . I—" He *couldn't* be. "You expect me to believe—"

"Would I *lie* about such a matter?"

"You think I'd—" She bit off her sneering outrage, both recalling his title, and because she couldn't find words to finish.

Her snarl got an answering snap. "You'd rather stay and argue with a judge about using illegal potions to drive a man mad?"

The discussion clearly couldn't be helped. She turned her head sharply, knowing the light would shine without forgiveness onto eyes the color of dead leaves and yellow vomit. "It'd be less insult to

offer money," she hissed.

~~The Guild Master drew back. His own eyes were some pale color. "It was a *question*, not a threat.~~

"So says the gray watch, when they ask if it'd be *troublesome* if they stumbled into the moon-steeping racks!" Perhaps the dosed tea had loosed the giddy outrage she knew better than to show. Perhaps she was merely too shocked to contain her words.

He frowned, eyes sliding away from her face. "Someone's done that recently?"

"Last month. Mid-moon." She waved a hand, dismissing the incident, and realized he'd changed the subject and reined in his temper, both. Kessa shook her hair back into place and reminded herself to steady, steady, and think of word-recipes that might yet slip her free. Her fingernails dug into her palms, her skin blurring into her skirts in the shadows.

From his voice, he still frowned. "Did you report them?"

"No. I gave them bruise-salves." She sighed. "The true watch . . . have little use for me."

"What badge do they carry?"

"Carvers, Weavers, Whitesmiths . . ." She shrugged. It could've been guild conflicts, the guards siding with whichever guild paid their stipend, but more likely it was her pale-copper skin and dirty eyes.

"I'll have someone look into the situation."

Kessa nearly asked *why*, before recalling her dues bought more than lack of harassment; insult to an herb-witch could spread to the whole guild. *But what of harassment within the guild?* She looked away, her hair sliding comfortingly against her cheek.

The Guild Master paused, then took a breath and released it. "Did you poison the man?"

This was at least close to what she'd rehearsed in the darkness. "You'd made your mind up when you dosed the tea. Whatever I say won't matter."

"*Someone* poisoned him. If not you, then some other herb-witch or alchemist, and I must discover who."

"He'd few friends. Many people owed him money. And he charged fees, should one pay him back early." Pure truth.

"You suggest he tripped and had a brain-fever from the blow?"

She wound her hands into her skirts. "What I brewed shouldn't have done that," she muttered, and tried to remember if truth potions were fantasy or forbidden. It wasn't a compulsion, but definitely an urge. Mayhap just outrage. "If another'd added to his tea, though . . ."

"You'd be unaffected, yes," he said. "But you should've detected it. And you didn't warn him."

She kept her face turned away. Kept her hands still. "I didn't taste anything else in the tea," she said, relieved at the calm lie.

"Then other doses would've been from another source. A candle, incense, something else he ate. Oil on his skin."

"I wouldn't know. I left as quickly as I could." More planned words, easy in her mouth.

"What was your potion intended to do?"

"Make him sleepy," she whispered. *And suggestible*, she didn't.

Again the clothing's rustle warned her, so she didn't twitch when his voice was far too close to her ear. "Why?"

Truth . . . always mix enough truth with the lies. The alchemy of a lie was in how little one used. Still, the words dragged at her throat. She wanted to spit them out like poison. "He'd offer to 'forgive' interest, in return for favors." She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her half-choked laugh. "Some favors, one might rather risk a sleeping draught."

"And you owed him money."

"Not after yesterday." Truth was a potent herb. "I'd even covered the 'early payment' fees."

"Then why," the Guild Master asked, so quiet and close that his breath warmed her ear, "did you dose him?"

"He claimed I'd not enough after all."

The Guild Master was silent a time. Kessa thought, *If you aren't going to trust me, why, by Earth and Rain, did you propose?*

Finally, he said, "I will attempt to cure the man. Should this fail – likely, with unknown, mixed potions – I will pay a suitable consolation to his heirs. Perhaps call it a brain-fever, if I must." His tone was intimate, but the words . . . matter of fact. Slightly irked.

Kessa managed a sharp, jerking nod.

"I will escort you to your shop. You shall tell me about the 'gray watch' members. If you vanish, I will assume you've been abducted, and I will find you."

She couldn't help stiffening her shoulders, though she stopped herself from staring at him again. And yet, he'd not repeated his mystifying proposal. "I see."

He stood, and held out a hand. "Shall we depart?"

Kessa looked at his hand (little spots and tiny scars, as any experienced alchemist might have) and let go her breath. *You want to stay here, half-breed? Risk your crèche-sibs putting themselves in danger for you? Choose.*

She took his hand. Standing, she took his offered arm.

They walked out of the cell; she kept her eyes downcast and didn't cling to him with knee-shaken relief. Only with politeness.

Chapter II

Immune.

The girl (*Kessa*, Iathor corrected himself) moved with as stiff a spine as any a department instructor might wish. Her pace was perhaps rougher than that of a city-prince's daughter, but prison floors weren't as even as a ballroom's, either.

Immune.

He'd have to arrange proper dance tutoring.

Immune. He pushed the reverberating thought away, focusing on the minute pieces. The trivia. There was a chance she *wasn't* immune to the dramsman's draught . . . But it was slight indeed. Her alleged tongue-blindness? Unlikely; Tryth hadn't forced honesty.

Immune! Thinking of alchemical formulae only spun off into giddy, swirling patterns of immunity and its implications. He forced himself to darker thoughts. Anyone with alchemist's immunity, *knowing* she had it, needed to be watched, for her own possible excesses, and watched over, lest some other family seek to breed immunity with blackmail, threat, or force. Her half-barbarian features worked against that, but the thought of taking the title of Lord Alchemist for one's own lineage might make someone . . . less squeamish.

And there was the Shadow Guild, where illegality was taken for granted.

Immune, his thoughts still whispered. *And accused of disminding a man*, he forced himself to remember. She'd have to be cleared (impossible without irritating lies or cover-ups, as she'd admitted partial blame) or persuaded to confess and accept a judge's sentence. If they could find the other alchemist whose preparation had mixed with hers, however, there might be guilt to go around. If that other brew's intent had been more hostile, concealing her part would hardly roil Iathor's conscience.

This, he could focus on. Protect his guild member; protect the city *from* his guild member; find the other ingredients to the mysterious brew, metaphorically and literally. So he spoke calmly: arranging air-purifying clae and a fresh Incandescens Stone for the guards in the underground prison, recovering the herb-witch's basket of wares, asking for paper and graphite to send messages (none important enough for ink) and leave one for Watch Commander Rothsam that he'd taken the herb-witch. Giving the guards his word that her behavior wouldn't land her back in prison.

Kessa's hands didn't tighten on his arm, but she held her breath a moment. It was gratifying that she understood what he'd pledged.

He needed a better way to secure her cooperation than intimidation, though. He shouldn't have lost his temper, even briefly. Perhaps the location'd reminded her of the unfortunate Darul. She wasn't an exotic beauty, but some people had a taste for power. (If the moneylender *was* a corrupt man; other clients would have to be questioned.) What hold had Darul had on her, that she'd rather risk illegal herb-witchery than ask her guild for aid? Iathor hoped he was wrong; if the man *could* be cured, he could be interrogated.

He sent his footman, Dayn, to the carriage with Kessa while he wrote the necessary messages (including notes to himself) at the Watch Commander's own desk. Then he removed himself in deliberate good humor, leaving behind the alchemy-smoothed stone of the prison and the red brick of the watch station above it.

Kessa waited in the carriage, stiffly upright, basket beside her on the rear cushion. In the better

light, dirt stains showed at the hem of her mended, brown smock, and grass stains where knees would be when picking herbs. Her shirt's sleeves had wrinkles from being rolled up frequently, and spots where sweat and potion-spatters hadn't washed out. No bonnet, understandably. Her hair was true-black, not merely horse-dark. Her eyes . . . were downcast, so he couldn't tell if it'd been the Incandescens Stone's light that'd made them such a sickly color.

Properly, herb-witch colors were brown and green, for earth and plants. Green dye was expensive, for symbology, grass stains sufficed.

Iathor sat opposite, while Dayn closed the door. The carriage creaked as the footman took his position on the outside perch. Jeck, the driver, started the horses, and Iathor's passenger swayed. Her sandaled feet peeked from under the skirt, grubby toes pressing against the floor to steady herself. Her hands remained firmly in her lap.

Her silence and downcast gaze let Iathor study her: posture that wouldn't have shamed a noble's daughter, which fought the lack of height and thin fingers and wrists that made her seem barely a woman at all. More like an underfed child, hiding painfully sharp ribs beneath her clothes. He frowned at the hollows of her cheeks. "Have you eaten today?"

Kessa's eyebrows drew in, visible between the twin sweeps of her hair. "No." Her tone suggested tense bafflement.

"Hmph." He twisted to slide back the panel that let him tell Jeck, "Stop by the first food-seller who seems acceptable, please. Our guest hasn't had breakfast."

"Yes, m'lord," his driver said cheerfully.

Turning back, Iathor caught a glimpse of Kessa's startled face before the herb-witch looked down again. She muttered, "You don't . . . I've no money with me."

Iathor frowned. "The guards didn't take it, did they?"

"No. I'd forgotten the purse, and turned back for it just when they came to arrest me." Her lips curled slightly, wry. "I didn't fuss, considering."

Considering. Expecting a senior herb-witch or her local guild officer to investigate. Iathor'd only been there because a Potters' watchman heard the Weavers' men had "lost" an herb-witch, and potters and glassblowers preferred to be on good terms with alchemists. "I'm glad I needn't investigate outright theft by the city watch."

"No. They're not malicious."

Just deliberately negligent. "I still disapprove of them letting this 'gray watch' harass shopkeepers. Have you skill to draw a picture?"

"Not really. I can describe them."

"I suppose I shouldn't ask you to point them out," Iathor mused. "Not until I've arranged . . ."

"Arranged what?" she asked flatly, lifting her eyes.

Their color was . . . unfortunate. A medium shade, mottled between dirty yellow and a brown the hue of rotting herbs. Her face went cold and flat in a barbaric sneer. He dropped *his* gaze, to her mouth and pointed chin, and thought perhaps she was only politely chill.

"Protections," he said, which wasn't what he'd been thinking.

"Mm." Kessa was demurely downcast again.

Adept at hiding those eyes. Must've been born with . . . Of course she was. Immune. Potions that changed bodies, to curse or cure, couldn't work. A political hindrance, but not insurmountable; she already compensated.

It crossed his mind that she might have a suitor, though she'd not mentioned such. (All right, he'd been sudden enough to surprise *himself*. He was hardly some drunken, itinerant, dragon-oil peddler, to be mockingly dismissed.) He began, "Have you—"

Outside, Jeck called "whoa," and rapped on the panel. "Found a bread-stand, m'lord!"

Tightly, Kessa repeated, "I've no money with me."

Iathor ~~sighed through his nose, and swung open the carriage door.~~ "Dayn, get enough bread for all of us, please. Even the *horses*, if Jeck wishes." He sat back against the seat, crossed his arms, and waited.

Only after Dayn brought a cheap basket of rolls did Kessa say, low and resigned, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Iathor took a warm roll for himself; his breakfast had been rushed and small. "Now eat."

From her determined daintiness, she'd have refused if she'd eaten before being hauled into prison and darkness. Iathor congratulated himself on feeding the poor girl, then realized only a rude knave discussed unpleasantries at a meal, and he doubted any obvious topic qualified as pleasant.

Chapter III

Kessa ate bread with someone she suspected she'd hate *very soon now*. He *sat* smugly; she could tell by how he crossed his legs in that metal-gray hose. And, blight it, she *was* too hungry to throw the bread in his face, even if he weren't her Guild Master and the Lord Alchemist, the highest rank of the most potent guild, inherited just as noble titles were.

She finished the roll and stubbornly didn't take another, though several remained. Perhaps the horses would be hungry. She'd eaten . . . sometime yesterday. She didn't need another warm lump of debt.

Iathor Kymus, Lord Alchemist, Guild Master, and apparently her bane, finished his bread, sighed, took another from the basket, and took her hand. As she looked up in outrage, he turned her palm upwards and dropped the second roll into it without meeting her glare. He took bread of his own again, his gaze sliding quickly past to leave him looking out the window.

Kessa refused to fling *this* food, either. Little merchant girls wouldn't, for all that roof-rats would. She'd not let her temper betray her.

So she watched him, between sharp, neat bites. His black outer robe hung the way a dangerous bodyguard's would, and she'd already scented mingled hints of at least a dozen preparations. She'd wager half an apothecary shop lay against his chest, each vial in its own pocket. There were hints of proper green shirt-sleeves at the ends of the robe's cuffs, and brown showing at the collar, above the embroidered gray of his formal tabard.

His face and neck were as fair-skinned as any noble's. (Undoubtedly her hands would look too dark, strangling him.) Pale brown hair, with just enough wave that you couldn't call it straight, just enough gray that you couldn't call him young. Not enough wrinkles to seem old, but potions could fix that. Medium-blue eyes. Face a bit narrow, but not so sharp as hers. If not wearing the colors of alchemists, in the fabrics of wealth, he'd have been as nondescript a clerk as any who scurried through the streets, heads full of numbers and accounts.

He had alchemist hands, though: faint stains, faint scars, long and precise fingers holding his roll with the instinctive care one learned if one made dangerous potions – and wanted to keep having feet or at least floor.

No rings, of course. Nor in his ears, thankfully, for that would've added more confusion.

Why'd you propose to me? He'd wealth, power, wasn't ugly . . . She opened her mouth to demand an answer.

A memory slapped her mind. "*Show gratitude to the man who feeds you.*"

She looked down. It shouldn't matter. He'd likely abandoned his mad idea once he saw her outside. So she'd be a proper guild member: journeyman herb-witch with a little shop, loyally reporting to Master Rom, the alchemist responsible for her area. She'd sweetly rat out the gray watch. She'd point at the local city watch's favorite tavern. And once the Guild Master found some other reason for wretched Darul's accident, he'd leave her be. Indeed, he might leave everything to Master Rom, once he dropped her off.

That cheering thought made her look out the window to see how close they were.

Her store was in a part of the city that was . . . better than lower-class. The streets were brick and dirt, level enough for carts but bumpy beneath the carriage. Most of the buildings were brick on the

first floor, but wood inside and above. Apartments went above Kessa's shop, and to the side till the end of that block. ~~The weaver on her other side had looms for rugs, tapestries, and bedding, and several ill-paid apprentices to work them.~~ A tavern with some sleeping rooms (more used with the serving girls) ended the block to that side. Across the street was a baker, with bread inferior to what she'd been fed, and more apartments, built of just enough brick to look proper. The stores had at least one wide window with thick chunks of glass; the tavern and apartments just had shutters. Those living here were either on the way down, clawing desperately for some rescue rope, or on the way up, inch by determined inch.

Kessa was among the latter.

The carriage halted, and the servant opened the door. Kessa slid out, murmuring thanks as the young man helped her down.

She turned, to explain she'd go immediately to Master Rom's office and give the information he'd asked, and found herself closer to the Guild Master's chest than intended. *Oh, he can't mean to come in!*

He held the basket of rolls.

He probably did.

With a deep breath, she walked to her door. Her key was still strung around her neck, happily. Picking that lock wouldn't be hard, even for her, but she'd no tools and it might raise suspicions.

Chapter IV

Iathor waited patiently as Kessa fumbled with her key. This wasn't a prosperous area, but adequate for a journeyman herb-witch who'd been granted permission to manage a shop. Master Rom was likely satisfied with her work.

Kessa unlocked her door and entered, leaving it open. Iathor followed.

It was dark inside, though Kessa pulled back the curtains, letting light leak past the shutters. Iathor leaned out and asked, "Dayn, could you open the shutters?"

"Of course, m'lord."

The resulting light undoubtedly saved Iathor from ignominiously stubbing his toes on the heavy worktable in the middle of the room. He set the basket with the remaining rolls upon that table and prowled, using his nose as much as his eyes. The herbs hanging from the support rafters smelled of exactly what they looked like, concealing neither other ingredients nor mold. The moon-rack, covered in thick, black fabric, was in the window ledge where Kessa leaned, arms folded. Iathor was careful to only sniff that; prodding might let sunlight in, ruining nights or even months of moon-steeping. The shelves, nailed to the walls in slightly erratic levels, held jars and sachets – all with identifying marks and all smelling as they should.

One shelf, set high for his reach, held unmarked jars and vials. Most looked or smelled familiar: the golden tincture that went into curatives, a nose-biting paste to relieve congestion, carriers for sunburn-balms, the mint oil that could lower a lip-blister . . . One jar, striped in red, defied identification with eyes or nose. Iathor frowned at it and set the jar on the counter, pulling his white-glazed spoon from a pocket to get a light dusting of powder into his hand. Then he licked it up.

There was a muffled noise from the herb-witch. He wondered, as he sorted the powder's ingredients by taste, if she'd been about to warn him against unwary sampling. *How else would I command a guild full of eccentric alchemists?* Without the immunities, there'd be scheming ranging from practical jokes by apprentices and journeymen, to lust and loyalty potions, to poisoning. The first were a nuisance to be quashed patiently. The middle could be mitigated by a dramsman bound to the city-prince or the Princeps. The last . . . required immunity.

The powder's taste was still odd, though with the bittersweet of a quickened preparation. He lapped a slightly larger sample out of his hand. Earth-water edge . . . Almost-numbness of the tongue . . . He glanced over; Kessa dropped her gaze before her eyes could be seen. "What is this?" he asked. "It's somewhat like *clae*, but you've added river-root."

She took came and put the lid back on the pot. "It's for beer. It takes away what makes people drunk. Only for a glass or two, though. Any more and you . . . And most people'd get queasy. It might work on wine, but beer's cheaper to test."

"Hm. Why not—" *—use a Vinkest's pill?* he didn't finish. Vinkest's sobriety pills were popular at the alchemical school in Cym that Iathor and his brother'd attended as journeymen. They were, however, pure alchemy. This concoction . . . was pure herb-witchery. "You developed this recipe yourself?"

She went on tiptoes to put the jar away. "Yes," she said, sounding oddly resigned.

"Fascinating. How much is a dose?"

"For a single glass? One, mayhap two of your spoonfuls there."

"And its cost?"

"For the pot or the dose?" she asked. Her tone held mystification at the edges.

He folded his arms. "What you're selling it for." Not that she *should* be selling any, unless Master Rom'd approved it, but he tasted no harm in the thing.

"Copper half-flower a dose. Two more leaves for two. And only to those who've been warned what happens if they take too much."

"Mm." He went to the door, obtained money from Dayn (who was better equipped to fend off cutpurses), and returned with a copper tree, flower, and leaf. "Ten doses?"

Kessa took the coins, weighing them in her hand; he nearly thought she'd taste them to see if they were real. Then she nodded and fetched her own spoon and paper squares (apprentice-work, from the uneven hue and texture) to measure out the doses with as steady and smooth a hand as Iathor's own mother had ever displayed, when he was eye-high to tables and watching in fascination.

That train of thought could only lead to more suddenness; he'd already startled Kessa overmuch. He went prowling again, to investigate her storeroom. "What else are you working on?" he asked, pushing aside the curtain.

She didn't answer, but he hardly noticed. Instead of a storeroom . . . Light slanted over a low cot with threadbare blankets. A stool sat beside it, and a chamberpot was in the corner. Shelves with jars, baskets, and bundles of herbs covered the walls, including a nailed-shut door to the expected stairway leading up to personal rooms.

Apparently the building's owner had seen more profit in leasing a shop below and apartments above, and Kessa Herbsman was frugal enough to make do with what she had. Which, he realized, included no sources of heat save what might seep down from above. He let the curtain fall back and asked, quietly, "What do you do in the winter?"

She stood as straight as any impoverished noble, holding out the twist of paper. "I use an extra blanket."

"I see." Iathor came and took his purchase. "I'll ask Master Rom to have someone get a description of the 'gray watch' from you." He could not bear to stay; the awkwardness of his hasty proposal hung between them, added to his unexpected intrusion – and the shade of his own mother whispering that there'd been no permission granted for a table-high boy to come into her private room.

Before he left, though, he added, "I will find you, if you vanish." In the tangle of memory and embarrassment, he honestly wasn't sure if that was more promise or warning.

However she took it, she curtsied silently, hands wrapped in her skirts.

He made his voice merely polite, saying "Good day, Tradeswoman Kessa." Then he escaped to his carriage.

Chapter V

The market square was busy, the usual odors mingling with the smell of autumn leaves being burned for luck. Kessa doubted anyone'd notice her unless they were looking for an herb-witch. Still, *she* needed things. Herbs, bird bones, paper . . . Perhaps a better knife, if she could find one cheaply. She'd more coin now, and only a half-flower owed to the guild . . . *Is that fair? He bought it, so the guild should get its portion, but he's the blighted Guild Master, so . . .* Well, it left her with over a tre for spending.

A glint of blond from a narrow alley, shadowed in comparison to the market square, made her lift her gaze and squint. She shaded her face with one hand, more to half-hide her eyes. Yes, that looked like Jontho's slouch, for all he wore a baker's apron, with his hat-brim pulled down. She moved over to the young man.

"Hey, Kess-kess-kessalan." She couldn't see much of him, from sun-glare in her eyes, but it was his clear, deep voice. (Attractive as the rest of him: blond, blue eyes, and pale as a noble. The calluses on his hands didn't match any noble pastime, though.)

He didn't have an odor she could pick up over the sweat and scents of the market square itself; she'd brewed the ointment to keep dogs – and keen-nosed humans – from sniffing him out.

Kessa smiled, looking at him through her hair. "Hey, Jontho. How's Laita?"

He frowned. "Worried sick about you."

Kessa leaned on the corner between sunlight and shadow. "She heard the watch got me?"

"It did?" Jontho reached out to her shoulder. Mysterious thin scratches marked his wrist. "No, 'cause the blighted wretch'd gone babbling, not just forgetful. You all right?"

"Aye." She smiled again, tiredly. "Guild officer got me out. Though . . . I admitted the sleeping potion – and that someone else must've had a similar idea, so there may be Alchemists' Guild poking around."

Jontho's frown got deeper, though he didn't ask why she'd confessed even that much. "I'll keep love Kessa, you didn't use some other potion, did you?"

Kessa shook her head. "No. But if you mix potions . . . Well, some potions don't care. Some do. Whatever someone else fed him, it mixed with mine and instead of helping M'lord Sleepy into bed, I found myself with M'lord Drooling and Babbling. *Then* he fell asleep. And someone'd seen me with him."

"Too blighted memorable, Kesskess."

"Herb-witches can be, Jonno. Unlike . . . bakers, today?"

"And chimney sweeps yesterday, and perhaps manure collectors tomorrow."

"So long as you're not filching watchman tabards the day after." She ran her fingers along one swoop of her hair, from forehead to base of neck where the ties fastened it, to be sure it was hanging right. "Oh, 'ware the gray watch. My guild's taking notice, I think."

Jontho whistled a low note. "What guild officer bailed you out?"

She snorted. "So you can move to his territory, or be sure to keep out?"

"Mayhap both." He grinned.

"You'd *try*, wouldn't you." She smoothed the other side of her hair. No reason to lie, she supposed. She didn't have to tell everything, even to Jontho. "My Guild Master himself. Don't ask me why the

Lord Alchemist was rescuing an herb-witch."

Jontho started choking exaggeratedly; Kessa ignored him, adding, "Mayhap he was just checking that the guild stipends were getting to the right guards, and decided to take an interest."

"Kessa! Sweet Rain and Earth! And you *confessed* to him?"

It'd been stupid. She could've claimed total innocence. She'd not had to give any truth, not really. Surely he'd have brought her out just the same, and fed her, and taken her home? Surely. She grimaced. "I don't discount truth potions, Jonno-bro."

"Was it . . . hard, to keep us out of your story?"

Kessa slid her basket down her arm and held its handle with both hands. "You know me. Put just 'bout anything in my mouth without harm."

"Feed it to Kess; she'll survive anything."

"Aye," she agreed. "Now, how *is* Laita? Does she need any more healing brews? Dry tea?"

He shook his head. "No, she's still got till the end of the month on that. And she's getting her strength back. Should be working again in a fiveday or less." He tried to smile again, but it was wan.

"I wish she'd a better trade." Beautiful, sickly Laita. Kessa added, "Or get a proper patron who'd take care of her."

"And her brother, too?" Jontho shook his head. "Not everyone goes straight, Kess."

"It's not that hard," she muttered at her basket.

"You were in debt to that blighted 'M'lord Reus' for years! And handing him potions on the side to pay the 'interest'!"

Kessa glowered directly at Jontho. "She could try. She's free of the blighted wretch now, and even the Lord Alchemist himself doesn't think Darul can be cured. Help her get a steady patron, and out of those wretched taverns, before she gets sicker than I can mend."

Even her crèche-brother flinched from her unconcealed eyes, looking over her shoulder instead. "Kess—" He broke off. "Watch coming." He faded back down the narrow gap between the buildings.

It was better not to draw notice by glancing nervously over one's shoulder. Instead, she twitched her head, shaking her hair back into the two curves that shielded her face. (If she'd Laita's curls, the style would never've worked. Her straight hair almost looked elegant, she fancied.) She wanted to follow Jontho through the alley, but that'd look too suspicious. Either they'd leave her be, or . . . not, and she'd have to drop names. *Iathor Kymus, Lord Alchemist and my Guild Master.*

Kessa hated being so beholden to the man, even when he wasn't there.

She'd made it half-way across the market square before the pair of watchmen showed up to either side of her. She didn't recognize them from the group who'd taken her to the prison, in that chill, pallid dawn, but one (freckled, with fine red hair on his bare forearms) had a Weavers' badge on his watchman's tabard. The other (tanned and light-brown beard she'd glimpsed through her hair) was a Stonemason's man. They smelled of light sweat, from brisk walking in the sun.

The Weaver-paid guard touched her shoulder, then her basket, hanging from the crook of her elbow. "You an herb-witch?"

No reason for that question in that suspicious tone, unless he'd heard of her arrest. And, blight it, no reason for her to walk to the prison *again* and wait for some guild official *again*, and (she nearly twitched to think of it) risk it might be the Lord Alchemist *again* in a dark cell, remembering his crazy proposal . . .

No. If she had to use the distasteful weapon, best to use it for the kill. With luck, her Guild Master might never find out. "I'm Kessa Herbsman, yes. My Guild Master's investigating the matter himself. He's given his word that I needn't be kept in the prison for the time being." She half-lidded her eyes, almost looking up, and kept her back straight. It gave clarity to one's voice.

"Matter?" the Stonemason-paid guard echoed. "Pech, what's this?"

The redhead didn't quite stammer, but his tone suggested it was a near thing. "M'cousin said they' taken a half-breed poisoner, this morn. I thought . . ."

"I didn't poison the entire prison and escape," Kessa said. "My Guild Master brought me out. He didn't say I was confined to my shop, and I've errands. By your leave, watchmen?"

The tanned guard said, "The local Alchemists' officer is Master Rom, Pech. We'll check with him."

"May I go?" Kessa pressed.

Pech seemed uncertain, but the Stonemason's man waved at her. "Keep out of trouble, herb-witch. You know you're not likely to hide from the watch."

"Nor to try," she agreed coldly, with a short curtsey before striding off.

Chapter VI

Stopping at Master Rom's office had helped settle Iathor's roiling thoughts. Rom'd not been aware of the arrest, of course; that lost notification was why Iathor'd gone to make a point. Rom'd had Kessa's records, though: three years since she'd come from some tiny village, taught by Herbsman Chiftia. (He'd have to ask the Herbmater about Chiftia's skill. Rom'd been impressed by Kessa's competence, not Chiftia's name.) Rom'd been surprised that Kessa might've even half-poisoned anyone.

Quiet. Pays her dues, always informs him if they'll be late, and has partial payment even then. No family Rom knew of – which irritated Iathor briefly. It would've been simpler to negotiate with the girl's father . . .

Rom'd not known she'd already produced a passable masterwork. And certainly hadn't realized Kessa was . . . tolerant to alchemy. Nor had the large man known of the gray watch; he'd been suitably appalled, promising to send one of his apprentices to get descriptions from her.

Iathor'd stated his intent to take Kessa as a student (the traditional way to handle journeyman prodigies) and set out for the next necessary stop, hoping the tradition-minded Rom wasn't guessing *how* alchemically tolerant the herb-witch was. It wouldn't do to alert those who might seek to coerce Kessa into . . . anything.

Arriving at the hospice saved him from brooding over the chaos a rogue immune could cause.

The Alchemists' Guild-funded hospice was red brick, two levels high. The basement was a utilitarian workroom for the brewing of healing elixirs and salves. The ground floor held rooms for patients and healers both, as well as a small lecture hall, and the upper level was used for patients and storage. Iathor remembered when it'd been built: one of the last projects of his father, and one of the first of his.

Iathor's messages had raced ahead of him suitably; when his carriage arrived, an older bonesetter and an apprentice alchemist (a girl, unusually) greeted him in the entry room.

While the apprentice curtseyed, tongue-tied, the gray-haired bonesetter said, "Welcome, Master Kymus. I'm Peran. This is Nicia."

Master Peran was a bit older than Iathor, without benefit of *Vigueur* to keep his hair from shading out of dark blond into gray and silver. Iathor shook hands with him. "Good to finally meet you, Master Peran. Master Isio speaks highly of you. Nicia, I hope you're being useful here."

"She is," Peran said, across the girl's stammers.

The Bonesetters' Guild and Alchemists' Guild had officially neutral relations, despite the obvious advantages of alliance. Bonesetters could be touchy and arrogant, as could alchemists, rarely tolerating the other's mistakes. From explosions to synergy, the results of combining bonesetters and alchemists depended on the individuals in the mix.

Peran wouldn't have accepted employment at the hospice if he detested alchemists, but from his brisk manner, neither did he think them spirit-inspired geniuses. "We've gotten the man from his sister's home. He's docile enough, but I've an apprentice in his room just in case." Peran snorted. "Or just in case someone decides to silence him more effectively. They'd have had a better chance at his sister's."

"Was she troubled to release him to the hospice?" Iathor asked.

"I wasn't there, but the journeymen who helped your Master Aleran didn't mention any troubles. I imagine the notion appealed greatly once she found someone else'd pay for it."

"I'll have to talk to her," Iathor sighed. "Would you like to be present when I examine the man, Master Peran, or shall I conscript Nicia as my guide?"

"I'd be interested in watching your examination. Everyone has their own techniques." The bonesetter stuck his hands in his robe's pockets.

"Quite true. I'll be equally interested in your assessment." Iathor smiled, in the way that sometimes smoothed ruffled feathers of experts. "I'm not familiar with healing, and might miss something."

Peran's expression suggested he grasped Iathor's tactic, but wasn't averse to being soothed. "Mm. This way." He strode down the hallway, dark green robes rippling.

Iathor followed, Nicia trotting just behind. The building had the faint odor of strong soap diluted by many rinses; a spilled potion could cause havoc if not cleaned up properly, and spilling something on even old body-dirt or blood might make other potions activate badly. The basement leaked whiffs of herbs, salts, and simmering preparations.

He glanced at the girl. Where Peran wore the greens and reds of bonesetters, she was in brown and green, with a gray apron. "Been here long, Apprentice Nicia?"

"No, m'lord," she said, managing to bob another curtsy. "Mother said I was good enough to work here, three months ago."

Likely an herb-witch's daughter, then. "Your mother is . . . ?"

"Herbmaster Keli, m'lord." Again, the girl bobbed nervously.

Iathor well knew Keli. Few herb-witches sought official master-status within the Alchemists' Guild, instead staying "senior journeymen" and taking apprentices via blind-signed permission of the nominal master alchemist. The Herbmaster championed herb-witches, which meant she visited his office frequently and with determination. Usually, he agreed with her goals, if not their means. Keli was short, but had a great deal of presence to go with her long plaits of dark brown hair. Her daughter had hair a shade lighter, almost honey-blonde, her mother's stature, and wide blue eyes that suggested an air of constant alarm. (Or perhaps it was just his presence.) He said, "I trust her judgment in herb-witchery. You're training further, in true alchemy?"

Nicia nodded, and *didn't* try to curtsy. "Yes, m'lord! Mother says I've the fine hands for the measuring, and patience for the brewing."

"And a tolerance for the brews?"

"A bit, m'lord. I don't faint from the fumes of a sleeping potion, anyway." The apprentice seemed pleased to be asked.

"Very good. It's embarrassing to wake up in the middle of your equipment." It'd only happened once, after staying up three days straight, trying to concoct a stimulant potion that'd *work* on him, but it'd been extremely ignominious.

She didn't giggle, but her eyes got even rounder.

He made a mental note to ask the girl's mother how high she believed Nicia's tolerances were, the next time they arrived.

The clean, whitewashed room was small, with a high window. The shutters swung inward, flat against the wall, to let in light and fresh air. Less flat were the wings of the framework that held chunks of window-glass; the room could have light in winter. The bonesetter apprentice was in the only chair; the muscled young man hurriedly stood.

Iathor took a breath (outside air, with horses and burning leaves; soap and little else) and stepped forward to look down at the madman.

Lying on the bed, wearing a long robe, Darul Reus was the thin, pinched sort of moneylender. His fine mane of blond hair was going to early silver, handsomely, without transitioning through dirty

gray. His eyes were a plain medium-blue, though, and his lax face full of frown-lines. Iathor bent and sniffed the man's breath. It would've been a long time, but . . .

Under the smell of corn porridge . . . was something sharper. One of the metal-salts, perhaps, to've lasted so long in the man's body. "Do you know if his sister gave him anything?" he asked.

"Food and cheap wine," Peran answered. "Wine made him even more docile, apparently."

Docile. And metal-salts. Iathor straightened, ruing that he'd not investigated the jars in Kessa's storage-bedroom. *Metal-salts are true alchemy . . . The combination could trigger any number of continuing effects.* Iathor asked, "Does he know his name?"

"No, m'lord," the male apprentice answered. "Not so's you'd notice."

Iathor went to one knee and moved a hand across Darul's field of vision. The madman tracked the motion, pupils constricting as he looked more toward the window. He wasn't drooling or babbling, though Iathor suspected he might've when the potions (or potion, singular . . .) took effect. When Iathor took the man's hands, they were chill and blue under the fingernails. No signs in the whites of his eyes, though, or at his lips.

Iathor sat back on his heels. "Master Peran, do you know if he's passed blood in his chamberpot?"

"No, seems normal enough, if scant. He's cold, though, and you see the blue nails."

"His breath smells off, too. Like some metal-salt."

"Oh?" Peran crouched to sniff at the madman's breath. "Feh, can't smell it."

"I've a good nose. A minor advantage of the bloodline."

"Mm." The other man looked over his shoulder. "Nicia, come have a sniff."

Obediently, the apprentice did so. Darul blinked at them all with vague interest. After several thoughtful breaths, eyes closed and nose deliberately unwrinkled, she sat back. "Something besides old food, I think. But you said so, Master Kymus, so I might be imagining it."

"Have someone wave ingredients under your nose, while your eyes are closed," Iathor said. "Being able to identify something from smell can be very useful."

She nodded and stood to move back to the doorway.

"Diagnosis, Master Kymus?" Peran asked.

"Alchemical poisoning, Master Peran. Deliberate or accidental . . . I won't know till I find what was used. I'll have his place searched."

"And treatment?"

"What would you do, Master Peran?"

The bonesetter snorted. "Keep him calm, warm, and fed. See if he can be trained to use the chamberpot, feed himself, dress himself, or at least come when called. If not . . . Try some of the mindbright potions after a few months. Not much else to do with him."

Iathor nodded thoughtfully. "Except I scent metal-salts, and those can sometimes be purged from the body."

"Aye," Peran mused. "So treat it like early poisoning, dosing with Purgatorie?"

Iathor tipped his hand, in lieu of the hat he wasn't wearing. "It's worth a try. At the least, Purgatorie can't hurt."

"The apprentices'll disagree, but we'll do it out back and sluice down the street when he's done." The bonesetter managed to look both maliciously amused and sympathetic.

Iathor winced. "Keep names, and I'll add something to the hospice stipends, this coming month."

"Pfft." Peran waved a hand. "It's their job. I'll give them an extra light-work day, perhaps."

"I yield to the master in residence." Iathor levered himself up, and remembered to offer a hand to Peran, who took it without self-consciousness.

Peran dusted off the knees of his hose. "Well, we've a plan. Aught else you need here?"

Iathor shook his head. "I thank you for your help, Master Peran."

"Always good to learn something new, Master Kymus," the bonesetter said agreeably. "I'll set Nicia to exercising her nose tomorrow."

Iathor approved of the muted interest on the apprentice girl's face. "Good luck to us all, then. And good day to you all." He nodded to them, shook hands again with Peran, and left.

Outside, as Dayn held open the carriage door, Iathor asked, "Any hope the rest of the day will go smoothly?"

The young dramsman grinned. "There's always hope, m'lord."

"Not reassuring," he muttered as the door closed. "Home, Jeck," he called through the panel, and the carriage started into motion.

Iathor leaned back against the cushion and idly wished that the first immune woman he'd ever found hadn't been in a jail cell, nor had a mystery attached, nor been at least half-guilty of destroying a man's mind. While he was at it, he wished it hadn't all happened on his light-work day. Rescheduling would've been a blighted nuisance, but his secretary would've been present for swifter delegation.

And Kessa could've been *slightly* grateful for the rescue. He was glad she'd avoided dramatic tears and clutching of robes, but thinking back, he didn't recall so much as a "thank you" from the journeyman till he'd fed her.

He sighed and stretched out in the carriage, since no one could see him being less than upright. He'd get lunch (excellent, excellent lunch) from his cook, see his officers, see the Weavers' Guild's representative, and perhaps send Baron Rhaus off early. *That* was ostensibly a social call, after all.

Traffic was no more unkind than usual. He made a few mental notes when the carriage lurched overmuch. It never hurt to gather good will by offering funds for road-repair.

Upon reaching home, he called to Jeck, "Kitchen door, please." That let him stroll through the back door – and into organized chaos.

Iathor blinked mildly as his household staff dashed about, the youngest babbling around his steward, while his cook directed her minions to focus on food instead of distractions.

Of the sisters, Tania, the cook, had fewer underlings to wrangle. Iathor sidled over. "Why's Loria so busy?" he asked, reaching for a small loaf, destined to be part of a tiny sandwich.

Tania mock-swatted his hand. "Your brother's home from Cym, all unexpected. His own house isn't prepared, what with his servants off *with* him, so we're opening the guest rooms till he gets his home aired out."

"Iasen's back from the capital already?" Iathor slipped around Tania and captured a bread-roll. "Did he say why?"

"Of course not, m'lord." Tania rolled her eyes. "We're just dramsmen. Why should we need to know?"

"To brief me, I'd hope. I'll kick him in the shins for you."

"Good of you, m'lord." His cook patted his cheek maternally. "Now off with you, before you get underfoot."

"Yes, your ladyship!" he said, and retreated in good order, glad his household coped so well with the unexpected guests.

While some of his brother's dramsmen would be off getting Iasen's house ready, and others would be rearranging the servants' quarters with Iathor's staff, his *brother* would likely be in the family sitting room that linked the two largest bedrooms together.

The sitting room door was open, and a fire crackled in the hearth, ensuring the light autumn chill wasn't just burned off by the sun, but given an exiling kick of *and don't come back*. Iasen'd taken the most comfortable chair, as always. He looked well in his mostly-gray clothes, also as usual; he'd gotten more of their mother's good looks, with lighter hair and eyes, and their father's taller build, though neither brother was anything except slender. (Iathor still muttered "Scrawny" at himself in the

bath, as he'd done since he was a journeyman.) Iasen'd grown a small, fashionable beard, luckily matching his hair instead of going redder or darker.

"Iasen, why *are* you back?" Iathor said as he walked in. "I thought you were wintering in Cym."

Iasen waved a hand at his older brother. "And greetings to you, too. My student here was having some problem, and I came to sort it out. I thought today was your light-work day, but you're already off visiting people, so there was nothing to do but wait for you to get back. Was she pretty?"

"What?" Iathor blinked, sorting between annoying herb-witch and promising apprentice before he realized this was an entirely hypothetical "she."

Too late. Iasen continued the baiting. "All right, was *he* pretty? Really, must I ask about livestock next, brother?"

Iathor sat – restraining himself from an undignified flop – in the second-most comfortable chair, across from Iasen. "I've been investigating an alchemical poisoning, if you must know." He reached out his toe and shoved his brother's leg. "That's for not telling my staff why you're here."

"Pfft, what do *they* care? I'm here, I need a room while my place gets cleaned up; that's all that matters. Got a bread-roll for me?"

"No." Iathor took a bite. "You annoy my cook, you get cold porridge for dinner. What's wrong with your house?"

Iasen rolled his eyes. "My student had a problem involving smoke."

"In your basement? This sounds amusing." Iathor was glad he didn't have full-time students underfoot, setting his workroom on fire. That would be a drawback of an herb-witch wife. Still, the woman'd not burnt down the firetrap she lived in . . .

"Oh, I'm sure it's amusing, but I've not gotten the full story out of Lairn – my student – yet." Iasen scowled and slouched in his chair. "I'm nearly tempted to put the dramsman's draught in his beer and hold his nose till he drinks it."

"Don't joke about that."

His brother scowled harder, focusing on him. "Bah. It's just us and our dramsmen. Mine know better than to gossip."

"Well, mine aren't so limited." *I attract enough stupid rumors without upsetting my staff with "don't talk" orders.* He took another bite of his roll, chewing till he could swallow his irritation with his brother's so-called jokes. "Will you be staying long, down here in Aeston, or are you headed back to Cym once you sort out your student?"

Iasen leaned his head against the back of the chair. "Oh, I hate autumn travel. I probably hate it even more than I hate winter in Aeston."

"It's over more quickly than winter."

"Trying to get rid of me already?" Iasen put a hand to his forehead in mock pain. "Don't tell me you've fallen in love with a chambermaid again! You and your filthy habits."

Iathor sighed out through his teeth. He didn't say, *I was fifteen and you only found out because you were trying to leave her flowers too.* Instead, he murmured, "No, I've not fallen in love with anyone."

"And you can't be worried about this poisoning thing affecting me – I've drunk at least half the things you have, and a few more you've not. Got a concubine from one of those brothels you like so much?"

Iathor avoided that topic with a flat, "No."

"So why're you already chasing me out of the city, if you don't want privacy for some deviant escapade?" Iasen grinned; an expression young ladies found wickedly charming when they thought no one else was listening.

"Guild politics are going around," Iathor said vaguely. The Weavers' Guild Master was touchy enough without adding Iasen's witty banter to the city's social mixture.

"You make it sound like the flu."

"The flu, I could mix potions for. Politics . . . not so much." Iathor grimaced.

"I could mix a potion for—"

Iathor stood. "Absolutely not. *Aside* from the blackest illegality of turning people into dramsmen unawares, it can be *useful* to leave others with *all* their free will. That joke, Iasen, isn't funny and I'll not hear it in my house."

Iasen sighed. "Of course, Lord Alchemist. I'm duly reminded you've no sense of humor."

"Especially on that topic. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must prepare for a meeting with my officers then with a representative of the Weavers' Guild. And before that, I must send a message to Baron Rhaus, begging off the dinner visit he wishes."

"Oh, let me take care of Rhaus. He's got decent stories." Iasen shoved himself straighter in the chair. "It's the least I can do after arriving so unexpectedly. You closet yourself with tea and headache and a tray of dinner from your fine, fine cook. *I'll* wine and dine Rhaus."

His brother *did* enjoy social matters . . . Iathor relented. "All right, but make no promises in my name, lest I disinherit you and have you thrown in the River Eath."

"Pon my honor, brother." Iasen put his hand upon his chest, looking fair and innocent of all malice.

"I'll tell Loria you've volunteered." Iathor gave a casual wave, and went to find his steward.

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